



NEWS RELEASE

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Knowledge (from SCORE) Key to Niche Player

Santa Ana, CA – Entrepreneurs are always looking for a hot market that's likely to get even hotter in the future. How about a group of American consumers that have more than tripled in the past 50 years and are projected to almost triple again in the next 50? Clothing Solutions, a Santa Ana catalog and Internet retailer, is pursuing just a niche within that group. It sells clothing for men and women who have difficulty dressing themselves because of limited mobility or dexterity. The company carries thousands of different dresses, blouses, men's dress shirts and T-shirts that snap up the back, colorful culottes for women who sit in wheelchairs all day and pants that snap or zip up the side.

A specific challenge for the owners, Julie Ruhlander and her husband Jim Lechner, was how to reach the buyer of their products. Obviously the buyer wasn't the wearer, and the buyers, usually family members, didn't even want to think of "adaptive" clothing until there was an emergency need. A key solution was to mail to skilled nursing facilities, which might then refer relatives to Clothing Solutions. Ruhlander asked SCORE counselor Bill Morland, a marketing expert who used to own a small retail business, to help with the marketing challenge. "Jim was very good at keeping records, so he knew what sells and where sales were coming from," Morland said. "I looked at the finances and every so often there would be a jump (in sales). When I asked what had happened, they said they had mailed out catalogs, so I asked why they didn't send out more catalogs more often." Ruhlander looked at two possibilities: mail catalogs more often and mail to a wider geographic area. The cost of additional mailings was enormous, however with each mailing orders increased, and now about half the company's business comes from outside California. Mail order is going great, but most growth is now coming from the Internet. [Www.clothingsolutions.com](http://www.clothingsolutions.com) in 2000 didn't even have a shopping cart, but over years it has been upgraded. "The website is critically important for them going forward," Morland said. "It will give them a leg up because there doesn't seem to be a lot of sophistication in this industry vis-à-vis the Internet."

SCORE is partially funded by the U.S. Small Business Administration to provide free, confidential counseling and low-cost workshops on business-related subjects. For more information about Orange County SCORE call (714) 550-7369 or visit their website at www.score114.org. For information on SBA's programs and services contact the Santa Ana District Office at (714) 550-7420 or visit their website at www.sba.gov/ca/santa .

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